THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Becoming the Body

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Church is other people, a worshipping community. The worship, or praise of God, does not take place only when people gather on Sunday morning, but when they gather to paint the house of an elderly shut-in, when they visit someone in the hospital or console the bereaved, when the Sunday school kids sing Christmas carols at the nursing home. If a church has life, its 'programs' are not just activity, but worship....When formal worship seems less than worshipful...I have only to look around at the other people in the pews to remind myself that we are engaged in something important, something that transcends our feeble attempts at worship, let alone my crankiness.

Amazing Grace
Kathleen Norris

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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BECOMING THE BODY

1 Corinthians 12:27-30; Luke 14:15-24

We come here, O God, out of our separateness. We are different people. We have different stories, and we come from different places this morning, some nearby, some on the other side of the world.

On this day, help us to get beyond our differences and to know something of our oneness. And use our experiences this morning in your ongoing project of reconciling the whole world through Jesus Christ our Lord. Now, startle us with your truth and open our hearts and our minds and our spirits to your word. Amen.

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."
1 Corinthians 12:27 (NSRV)

"Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it."

That's not my favorite metaphor. I don't know about you, but I'm not at all sure that I want to be the Body of Christ. If I remember correctly, the actual body of Christ wasn't all that comfortable and, as a matter of fact, ended up getting crucified.

Also, to be part of a body means to live with and tolerate and live in some kind of harmony with the other members of the body . . . and also to work with them, to be in sync, to do my job but to respect and honor and work for the success of the whole enterprise. As Paul put it, "What good is a hand without an eye?"

To be perfectly candid, I don't know about some of those other members. Groucho Marx used to say that he wouldn't belong to a club that would have him as a member. I'm not sure they want to be part of the same body that has me as one of its members, and, frankly, I feel the same way about them.

"You are the Body of Christ." It is one of the great mysteries of the faith.

When author and poet Kathleen Norris moved from New York City to her family's homestead in Lemmon, South Dakota, she found herself drawn to the church and thinking, for the first time in a very long while, about the Christian faith. Ultimately, she became a member of the Presbyterian congregation in Lemmon. She participates in the life of the congregation, serves as a supply preacher on occasion, and she writes about her experience with grace and integrity. Her books, *Dakota* and *Cloister Walk*, are best sellers. So is *Amazing Grace*, her most recent, in which she reflects on church:

> "From the outside, church congregations can look like remarkably contentious places, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other tooth and nail. This is the reason many people give for avoiding them. On the inside, however, it is a different matter, a matter of struggling to maintain unity as the body of Christ given the fact that we have precious little uniformity. I have only to look at the congregation I know best, the one I belong to. We are not individuals who have

> come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world: but God help us if we have to agree about things. I could test our uniformity by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, the Holy of holies—the church kitchen. But I value my life too much."

And then she digs in a little:

> The church is like the incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who do and say cruel things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ." (pp. 272-3).

"You are the body of Christ and individually members of it," St. Paul wrote to the members of the Christian church in Corinth.

"You are the Body of Christ," he wrote. That has never been a favorite image of the Church for me. I have trouble with it—not because it is not a good metaphor. In fact, it is a brilliant metaphor. The human body is almost a perfect example of the principle of unity in diversity. Furthermore, everybody can understand, because everybody has a body. Everybody experiences the principle daily—everything works together for the good of the whole. If something isn't working, nothing much is right.

Douglas John Hall, Canadian theologian, in his recent book, *Confessing the Faith*, argues that the unity of the church is a reflection of the oneness of God and the God-created oneness of the human family. So when the church is divided, something basic is violated. Unity, Hall says, is not incidental, but essential to Christian faith: ecumenism is not a luxury or liberal plot; it is part of the evangelical witness to which we are called. Hall writes:

> "Christians cannot accept as normal a plethora of institutions and sects, divided and distrustful of one another, claiming to have been formed by the word of reconciliation. Such a situation is a scandal and a travesty. One is amazed, reflecting upon our sad divisions that anyone outside the churches would bother to take such a religion seriously." (p. 73).

The oneness and unity of Christian people is part of the way we witness to the truth of the Gospel. Even to say that, however, is to know the irony Hall identifies. There are, in fact, thousands of denominations in our country—many of them claiming an absolute corner on the truth.

Michael Lindvall, reflecting on the tendency of Christians to discern the truth and then absolutize that truth and then attack everyone who does not discern the same truth in the same way, wants everyone to remember that none of us gets all the truth all the time, understanding that its part of what it means to be a Protestant.

I was caught by his advice, particularly on this World Communion Sunday. "We Protestants must learn to be Catholic. Our chief heresy has always been our temptation to schism, leading to the old Roman barb that the ultimate Protestant is one who belongs to a denomination of his or her own." ("Diversity and Disagreement in the Church," *The Register: The Company of Pastors*).

There is something about us—about the Presbyterian-Reformed way of being the church—that turns to conflict and division as a way of resolving differences. It is not a pretty sight.

It reflects, tragically, a similar dynamic at loose in our society and world. Nationalism, racial-ethnic identity and pride, tribalism—threaten all over the world to tear apart the fabric of the human community: in the Sudan, Northern Ireland, the Balkans—last week, Serbian police massacred 19 elderly people, mothers, and children, because they were Albanians.

Do you want to hear something interesting—something almost preposterous on the surface of it? The church is God's alternative to the world's propensity to divide and contend and fight along lines of tribe, clan, race, religion. The church represents God's precious alternative vision.

One time, Jesus told a wonderful story to illustrate. A man gave a dinner party and sent out invitations, which were accepted all around. But when the time for the dinner arrives, the guests started to drop out, offering a variety of good and not-so-good excuses.

The host is offended. His response is to get more guests. Not the kind he normally invites to dinner. Not the kind who were at that moment sitting at a table, enjoying the hospitality of a well-to-do and proper man about town. Go out on the highway and invite to dinner specifically those who never get invited, specifically those who are excluded by popular custom and religion.

This is a very different picture of what God's kingdom looks like, and it is a radically different notion of how God's people are related. Strangers become guests; outsiders become insiders; all are welcome because, in Jesus Christ, in God's heart, in God's imagination, all are one; all in their magnificent diversity are one.

In a world organized on the basis of boundaries and barriers, there are none here. There are no barriers here. There are no barriers of genetics, gender, race, physical incapacity; no barriers of religion or theology or ideology; no barriers of morality; no barriers of sexual orientation. All are welcome and the host will not be satisfied until all are present and every seat is filled.

It is a gorgeous picture of God's kingdom and the essential unity of the human family.

Of all things, scientists are now telling us that unity, oneness, is the organizing principle for the universe. Ever since Sir Isaac Newton, physics has understood the universe to operate on the basis of predictable, underlying mathematical rules. You could understand the universe by taking it apart and looking at its separate, isolated parts and systems and laws.

But, then someone discovered that the act of observing an electron causes the electron to act differently. And, suddenly, we are in a whole new place. "We are bound together in an invisible, unfathomable web of relationships." You have heard or read about the popularized version—the Butterfly Effect. "Every time a butterfly beats its wings, every time a cat yawns or a baby sneezes, the whole web shifts to accommodate it. It's called the Chaos Theory." Barbara Brown Taylor says the Chaos Theory is what St. Paul meant by the Body of Christ. " . . . that great mystery of God that binds us together whether we know it, feel it, like it or not." (See *Bread of Angels, Deep in Christ's Bones*, pp. 85-90).

I learned something this week. I should have known it all along, because it is simple. I learned it reading something Barbara Brown Taylor wrote. St. Paul is not urging you and me to agree with his metaphor and start to act like the Body of Christ. We are not being asked to evaluate the proposal, to try it on conceptually and see if it fits our experience. We are being told something—told something about who we are essentially, whether we understand it or like it or not. "This truth is beyond our consent or liking," Taylor says. You are the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ has made you his body. The God who is incarnate in Jesus Christ has a vision for the human race and you are it—for better or worse.

Is it an illusion, just an idealistic dream? Or is it a description of a truth about us that we keep hidden? Is it a reality which we spend a lot of energy trying to deny?

Jack Stotts told a powerful story about it in a speech he made last June on the topic of unity and diversity. Jack was addressing an audience gathered around the concern for the unity and inclusivity of our church. Jack was the President of McCormick Seminary. Let me tell the story as Jack told it:

> "McCormick Seminary had just relocated to the south side of Chicago to become part of a rich ecumenical cluster of theological schools. One day Bill Guindon, the president of the Jesuit School of Theology, called me up and said, 'I'd like to have you participate in an Ash Wednesday service next week. I hope that you'll impose the ashes with me and the presidents of the other schools.' Now, I was born in Texas. It seemed a little papish to me. But I agreed. We all took our places in the Lutheran chapel. As the people came forward, we imposed the ashes: 'From dust you came, to dust you shall return.'
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> Then a Lutheran layperson got up to speak. He put his manuscript aside and said one sentence: 'How strange it is that we can share the ashes of death but not the bread of life.'"

Sometimes the reality breaks through and confronts and compels us in spite of everything we do to deny it. It will today at 4:00 p.m., at Rockefeller Chapel, when four American churches—Lutheran, Reformed, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterian, with separate histories and cultures and vocabularies meet at the table to declare our unity.

Sometimes it happens gloriously with organ and trumpets and bright-colored vestments and graceful liturgy; and sometimes symbolically as we gather around the table here; and sometimes modestly, in almost invisible ways, the Body of Christ becomes real. Let me tell you about one of them.

A good member of this church was dying. I explained last Sunday how, when I visited him we discussed the best seller, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (conversations between Mitch Albom and Professor Morrie Schwartz, who was dying). Glen said he wanted to talk about the subjects Mitch and Morrie avoided. We decided our project would be, "Thursdays with Glen," and we talked and corresponded for an all-too-brief time just before he died.

Near the end, he told me something I will never forget. Glen was in a hospice. His mother and father and sisters had committed themselves to be with him all the way, as did other members of this congregation and a team of caregivers from a Presbyterian church in Munster. I asked him what the most difficult part of the whole experience was, and he told me that it was in the evening and his parents had to leave and he was alone with his pain and weakness and with the knowledge that he was dying. "But you know what I do?" he asked. "I get out my tape player and ear phones and put in a tape of the eleven o'clock service at Fourth Church. I must have a hundred of them. It settles me down. It helps me relax and sleep. Sometimes I fall asleep during the prelude or anthem, and sometimes during your sermon—sorry about that," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "but every night I go to sleep that way—here in bed, but also in my church."

We are God's vision for a divided world. You are what God means by unity in diversity.

You are—in ways you may not know—the Body of Christ.

Amen.